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## **Africa: 'Decisive Moment for Democracy' - John Kerry**

### GUEST COLUMN

By John Kerry

Washington, DC — Last May, I shared in an extraordinary moment. I had the privilege, together with many leaders from across Africa, of bearing witness to the first peaceful, democratic transition of power between two parties in Nigeria.

I traveled to Lagos earlier this year to emphasize that for the United States, Nigeria is an increasingly important strategic partner with a critical role to play in the security and prosperity of the region. I also said that it was imperative that these elections set a new standard for democracy across the continent.

There is no question that this is a decisive moment for democracy in Africa. Later this month, four countries – Guinea, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Central African Republic – are scheduled to hold presidential elections, and soon after we hope to see elections in Burkina Faso. People across Africa must seize this opportunity to make their voices heard; and leaders across the continent must listen.

The challenges are real. For decades, poverty, famine, war, and authoritarian leadership have held back an era of African prosperity and stability.

These and other challenges should not be underestimated, but neither should we ignore the gains that are being made.

In Africa, as elsewhere, there is a deep hunger for governments that are legitimate, honest, and effective. We should have no doubt that progress in democratic governance will lead to gains in every other field about which we are concerned.

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In Burkina Faso, brave and determined citizens twice asserted their will in successfully opposing efforts to curtail the democratic process: last year, when the former president sought to alter term limits and extend his 27 years in office; and again last month, when Burkinabes rallied against a failed attempt to seize power by elements of the Presidential Security Regiment.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we have seen citizens speak out, sometimes at great personal risk, to push for transparent, timely, and credible elections.

And we have seen that same hunger for democracy outside of Africa. Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Panama all recently held inclusive, well-organized elections that brought new leaders to power and strengthened democratic institutions.

The challenge in Africa's upcoming elections is to meet this demand for democracy and live up to the standards that Africans expect and deserve. The countries scheduled to go to the polls vary widely in their history and circumstances, but each has an opportunity to enhance its democratic credentials and advance economic growth and shared prosperity.

Côte d'Ivoire can put a difficult and violent election in 2010 firmly in its past and resume its position as a regional leader.

Tanzania is preparing for its fourth transition of power between elected Presidents since independence. By respecting the Tanzanian constitution's two-term limit and stepping down from office, President Jakaya Kikwete is creating a dynamic and healthy competition among potential successors.

Guinea is emerging from the scourge of Ebola, but its citizens are also calling for an electoral process that allows their voices to be heard.

Meanwhile, the transitional government in Burkina Faso is working towards cementing its commitment to democracy through timely and transparent elections.

Elections are vitally important, but make no mistake: elections cannot be the only moment for citizens to shape their future. People must be able to engage with their government and with their fellow citizens in political discussion and debate not just on Election Day, but every day.

Just as important is respect for term limits. No democracy is served when its leaders alter national constitutions for personal or political gain. Furthermore, a losing candidate owes it to his or her country to accept the outcome and play a constructive role in finding and implementing solutions to shared challenges.

A free, fair and peaceful presidential election does not guarantee a successful democracy, but it is one of the most important measuring sticks for progress in any developing nation. The

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countries soon holding elections have an opportunity to bolster their democratic credentials and to bring an entire continent closer to realizing the firmly held – and eminently justifiable – aspirations of its people to have their voices heard.

The United States remains committed to helping make those aspirations a reality.

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